

# Humor in Practice

By Rebecca Dixon

March 7, 2023

Tonight's talk is about Humor in Practice. It's common to see pictures of people who are having a good time. We know they are because they're laughing. In contrast, a southeast Asian teacher visiting an American retreat center once remarked that the students all looked like they were suffering terribly.

We tend to take our practice awfully seriously, and this can suck the joy right out of it. It's common to hear retreatants breaking down in tears during a meditation session. It's far more rare to hear an outburst of giggles.

But levity has a wonderful place in practice. Blessed are they who are amused by their own foolishness, for they will always have fun. If we allow ourselves to enjoy this practice, we'll be able to live comfortably inside it, always mindful – and entertained by what we observe in our thoughts and emotions.

Here's the main point: humor is like the anesthesia that allows us to cut through our defenses and observe what the mind actually does. This is important because most of us lie to ourselves all the time about who – or what – we are. It's called ego.

We want to believe we're wonderful, in some way that's different than the wonderful way we really are ourselves. Love and compassion for ourselves help us cut through our pretenses that we're some ideal self, and accept what the mind is actually doing.

It comes down to this: we identify with our thoughts, and we can be so ashamed of some of them that we pretend they haven't occurred. We suppress, deny or forget them, believing, "Oh, that's just not me." If we have a thought or feeling, that's us. Who else could have thought or felt it?

Unfortunately, ignoring or denying our inner life just gives our thoughts more power over us, and more influence over our future thoughts or conduct. In truth, we really do not choose the thoughts that occur to us. We see this clearly, and repeatedly, during meditation. We intend to watch the breath, but look... here's a thought. All we do get to choose is whether we're going to *keep thinking* it once we notice what's going on.

So it's vitally important that we honestly observe and acknowledge what happens in our minds, or else our minds will continue to be these wild, untamed beasts that run our lives in ways we don't like.

We usually think of the brain and the body as things that serve “us.” But we may have things completely reversed. I think of “the mind” as that part of the brain’s function that’s accessible to “us,” or rather, to our conscious mind. Many people think this is their “selves.”

It’s been said that we only use about 10% of the brain’s capacity, and fiction writers love to imagine what we would be like if we could use the other 90%. I suspect the brain has other very important things to do with that 90%, like control our vital organs. I think we’re better off if it’s behind signs that admit “Authorized Personnel Only.” For my part, considering the hash I make of my 10%, it’s a good thing I can’t get my hands on the whole 100%.

Neuroscience has known for decades that the brain performs a lot of decision-making without consulting us, and afterward, in case we wonder why we did something, the brain will give us some explanation, which may be illogical, or we don’t quite understand it, but we usually accept it anyway.

I’ve recently become well aware of how much my brain does without me. When I’m mindfully doing tasks, like gardening or cooking, I can see when I do something without deciding to. It’s usually the right thing to do, but I did not consciously form the intention to do it. These are things that are not habits, and sometimes they’re fairly complex behaviors. I am impressed by my brain!

I think this is the story with our minds in general. We really shouldn’t take them all that personally. We shouldn’t take our *sel/ves* that personally, because “we” are basically brain functions that evolved to keep us alive. Which is a good thing.

So we can sit back and watch our minds play like puppies, or young children, doing the best they can with their 10%. And we can go ahead and laugh fondly about what they do. I’m talking about a kind of levity that doesn’t have to be clever enough for a comedy routine. Simple stuff.

For example, I need to do physical therapy, holding a stretch for 10 seconds, then relaxing & repeating. One morning I was being very mindful – and *proud of it* – when I went to do my PT, and was in the stretch, and counting, and all of a sudden, I heard myself thinking, “21, 22, 23,” and I burst out laughing. Here I’d been all egotistical about being mindful, and pfft: totally lost in thought.

So when mindfulness shows us what goes on in our minds, and we don’t like it, we have a range of possible strategies:

- 1) Go into denial that we’ve had these thoughts
- 2) Feel bad about ourselves because of it
- 3) Find some justification or rationale for the thoughts, or (preferably)
- 4) Recognize that they’re not something “we’ve” chosen to think and

- Just let them go
- Learn something about the way our minds work
- Get a kick out of the silliness of the thought

Suzuki Roshi was once asked, how much “ego” do you need? He answered, “Just enough so that you don’t step in front of a bus.” The best way to deflate the ego painlessly is to have a good laugh about its shenanigans.

Some Zen students were bragging about their teachers. The first one said, “My teacher is the best. He can go days without eating.” The second said, “My teacher has so much self-control, she can go days without sleep.” The third said, “My teacher is wise enough to eat when they’re hungry and sleep when they’re tired.”

A deflated ego is one that can take care of our needs realistically, with love and compassion for how hard life is. In fact, living *your life* is a task so difficult, it has never been attempted before. So, give yourself a break, already.

Humor is the hallmark of renunciation, also known as letting go. What keeps us from laughing at the ironies of life is that we’re clinging to ideas of how things should be. We cling far too hard to our opinion of ourselves and our ideas. Laughter breaks those tethers and we let go... delightfully. When we hold things lightly enough to see the humor in them, we’re not causing ourselves the dukkha that comes from clinging. And that’s what this practice is all about.

Let me clarify a few points. I’m not advocating the kind of humor that’s at someone else’s expense. Even if a huge auditorium is cracking up, it’s not funny. That kind of cruel humor actually builds up the ego, encouraging people to believe they’re better than the butt of the joke. That kind of laughter is bad medicine for everyone involved.

Even when we’re laughing about ourselves, it still needs to be distinguished from fishing for compliments, and from expressions of low self-esteem. These kinds of “jokes” come from a weak ego, which can make us just as self-absorbed as an inflated ego, although it often *feels* worse. Both conditions are rife with suffering, each in its own way.

What I’m advocating leads to a healthy ego: Not taking your self seriously. Or whatever else the joke is about. In fact, what makes the joke funny is the various notions we may not even realize we have. For example: jokes based on common sexist, racist or other bigoted notions. I remember a joke that relieved me of the assumption that a surgeon was a man, with about equal amounts of embarrassment and humor.

Let’s face it, by their very nature, many of our attitudes can get pretty silly when we start taking them seriously. And if we don’t see that, we could end up taking them with deadly

seriousness, and that can lead to some very ugly behaviors, like hate speech, or mob violence or murder.

Like Wavy Gravy said, when you lose your sense of humor, it's just not funny anymore. It's so important to be able to chuckle about what our minds do. Remember, wherever you go, there you are. Your luggage might be another story. But even that can be good for a laugh. Far better chuckling than raging about the ineptitude of the airlines. I mean, who today really expects the airlines to do things right? The less we cling to an idea of how we – or other things – *ought* to be, the easier it is not to be upset by stuff. And how *much* better to be *entertained* by it.

A sense of humor helps us keep things simple, including our practice. Really, it's just breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Forget to do that and you'll never have to worry about achieving Nirvana.

It may sound as if all the literature and dharma talks are telling you to do things better than the way you're doing them now. What we're trying to do is just point to things that indicate you're fine just as you are, and all you need to do is to realize that. Relax, chill. Mellow out. Have a laugh.

A Zen student once stood beside a raging river and saw her teacher across the water. There were no bridges and she had no boat. She shouted out to the master, "How do I get to the other side?" The master shouted back: "You *are* the other side." The student laughed, and was enlightened.

Thank you.